Journal of Illicit Economies and Development

COLLECTION: WHY THE DRUG WAR ENDURES: LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL LINKAGES IN THE NORTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA DRUG TRADES

RESEARCH

The 'Real Man' in the Global War on Drugs: Narco versus Militarised Masculinities

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a discursive analysis of the life stories of thirty-three men who worked in drug trade organisations in Mexico, this article examines how masculinities are constructed in their narratives, and how these constructions mirror militarised masculinities implicit in official discourses of the global war on drugs. Participants' narratives draw on traditional gender discourses which historically have been promoted by the military worldwide. Former narcos assume that men's and women's roles and capabilities are fundamentally different, that only men can hold positions of authority, and that a 'real man' is heterosexual. Like militarised masculinities, the ideal man is constructed as physically strong, emotionally controlled, proud, rational, aggressive, and brave. Informed by this ideal male model, narco masculinities radicalise and enhance violent and aggressive behaviours and put them at the centre of the male identity. Crucially, what is also revealed in the narratives of former narcos, is that violence produced by criminals, and the violence produced by state institutions are two sides of the same coin. I argue that this coin is the militarised masculinities that are embedded at the very core of the war on drugs, and traditional gender discourses which promote violent strategies purportedly to protect society from the 'threat' of drugs. In this way, this article shows how gender plays a key role in perpetuating the global war on drugs and, therefore, the violence on both sides of the trenches.

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KEYWORDS:

masculinities; gender; war on drugs; military; drug trade violence; discourse analysis; Mexico; United States

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

García-Reyes, K. 2022. The 'Real Man' in the Global War on Drugs: Narco versus Militarised Masculinities. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(2), pp. 191–203. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.121

I. INTRODUCTION: 'US' VERSUS 'THEM' IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS

Mexican drug traffickers, usually referred as narcos, are seen as the *bad men*, hyper violent criminals who engage in the most gruesome types of murders and live on the fringes of society. This image has been produced by the mass media, but also by the governments of Mexico and the United States (US), who portray them as cruel *macho* men who pose a threat to civil society, hence the 'need' to launch a war on drugs to protect 'us' from 'them' (Zavala 2014; Cabañas 2014; Esch 2014). Dominant discourses portray narcos as the 'other', as aliens 'who are very different from "us", the state and "the law-abiding citizens"' (Edwards and Gill 2002: 252). This binary logic was produced in the US in 1971, when Richard Nixon declared the war on drugs. Later, in the 1980s, the Reagan administration constructed the 'drugs as a threat' discourse (ignoring drugs as a health issue) which required 'extraordinary measures' (Crick 2012: 407), such as the militarisation of the public security and internationalisation of the antidrug war (Telles 2019). In Mexico, this narrative has been reproduced since the war on drugs was launched by former President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) which has led to a dramatic increase in violence within Mexico. Interestingly, although the war was launched and sustained by the government, only narcos are blamed for the escalation of violence, as if state agencies were not involved in this violence. This implies a double standard position: violence is condemned when is perpetrated by narcos, but when deaths are caused by the military they are referred as 'collateral damage' (Ovalle 2010). This discrepancy is made possible thanks to what Cabañas (2014: 6) calls 'a kind of political linguistics', where, for example, the word 'violence' is never used to refer to state actions.

The global war on drugs has no end in sight. The number of drug users world-wide increased from 210 million people in 2009 to 269 million in 2018, and the drug trade has also increased (UN Report 2020). In this regard, there can be no question that the global war on drugs has failed by any objective standard. In Mexico, since 2006, the war on drugs has resulted in over 300,000 deaths (Justice in Mexico 2021) and over 85,000 disappearances (SEGOB 2021). However, despite the evidence, the US justifies the continuation of the war on drugs as the 'only solution' to fight against ruthless and 'hyperviolent' drug trade organisations (DTOs) (Telles, 2019).

Using a masculinities lens, and a discourse analysis of first-hand interviews with former Mexican drug traffickers, this article argues that what perpetuates drug trade violence is not only the violent behaviour of 'them', narcos, but mainly the militarised masculinities implicit in the 'war' launched by the state and accepted by global society at large 'us'. In doing so, this article provides a starting point to rethink the drug trade as another arena in which gendered power is established on a world-wide scale and contributes to masculinities studies and the militarisation of drug policy. The article is organised into five sections. The remainder of this introduction provides a discussion about hegemonic and militarised masculinities. The second section will go on to explain the methodology used to collect and analyse data. The third section examines how gender is discursively constructed by former narcos. The fourth section compares narco and militarised masculinities. The final section discusses why the 'real men' behind the global war on drugs are not narcos.

HEGEMONIC AND MILITARISED MASCULINITIES

Masculinities play a key role in the reproduction of violence linked to the global war on drugs. Masculinities are understood as patterns of practices that are commonly associated with men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Masculinities are not equivalent to men in biological terms and are suceptible to change over time and space (Coles 2009). A hegemonic masculinity is a particular set of practices, including role expectations and/or identities, by a group of men that 'inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance' (Carrigan et al. 1987: 92). This position of power and wealth, however, is only achievable through social and cultural institutions and legitimised by what Connell calls the 'patriarchal dividend': 'Men gain a dividend from patriarchy in terms of honour, prestige and the right to command' (1995: 82). In other words, hegemonic masculinities are mobilised at a structural level through the culture that accepts them as the legitimate paradigm of gender relations. However, although they are widely accepted, few men achieve hegemonic masculinities and thus they function as an ideal, as the aspirational male model that all men, who wish to be considered as such, should emulate.

In the context of the global war on drugs, militarised masculinities are hegemonic. Militarised masculinities are defined as:

> the assertion that traits stereotypically associated with masculinity can be acquired and proven through military service or action, and combat in particular. When state and military leaders aim to display strength through the use of military force or hope to recruit male citizens through appeals to their masculine identity, they are relying on and reproducing militarized masculinity. While men are not inherently militaristic, ***militarized masculinity is central to the perpetuation of violence in international relations*** (emphasis added) (Eichler 2014: 81).

Echoing Eichler's idea, and Cynthia Enloe's seminal work on the Cold War,[1] I argue that the hegemony of militarised masculinities in the global war on drugs is one of the key factors that perpetuates violence linked to the drug trade.

Historically, the military has been a masculine institution[2] that cultivates and emphasises traditional gender roles (Rayas 2013), by providing the space and resources so their members can construct and claim hegemonic masculinities (Hinojosa 2010: 180). Militarised masculinities are sustained by social institutions which reproduce traditional gender discourses, mainly the family, where men's authority and women's subordination are taught and normalised. Militarised masculinities are enhanced by popular culture such as movies, video games, novels and even toys, that promote an 'armament culture and weapons fetish' (Salter 2014: 166). In this way, as Connell explains, hegemony is established when '…there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power' (1995: 77). What is problematic about the dominance of militaristic masculinities within and outside state institutions, is that they entail hypermasculinity characterised by:

> [n]egative sexual attitudes about women and an association of manly with being violent and powerful, and other hostile and toxic expressions of masculinity that place high value on stereotypically male characteristics such as aggression, dominance, toughness, power and heterosexual prowess, and devalue stereotypically female-associated characteristics such as emotionality (Schaefer et al. 2021: 611).

The multiple issues that hypermasculinity in the military pose for women and men themselves within and outside the military have been widely studied by gender scholars (Enloe 1993; Higate 2012; Peterson 2007; Sjoberg 2010). However, the use of violence by the military is rarely questioned in other areas such as organised crime or drug policy studies,[3] because arguably the military´s job is to engage in violence to defend the nation's interests. In this sense, this article does not problematise the state monopoly on violence. Instead, it questions the excessive reliance on the military to tackle the so-called 'drug problem', by showing how militarised masculinities, embedded in current drug policies, play a role in perpetuating violence linked to drug trafficking.

II. DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

Data was collected through carrying out thirty-three life story interviews in the northern state of Coahuila, between October 2014 and January 2015. Most participants originated from the northern states of Chihuahua (4), Coahuila (11), and Nuevo León (9), all of which border the US. Accordingly, the masculinities discussed in this article correspond to the power dynamics and characteristics of DTOs at that time in North of Mexico. All participants were Mexican nationals, identified as male, were aged between 18 and 45 and had participated in activities related to the drugs trade.

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bristol. Participants were recruited through a religious organisation called *Cristo Vive* (Christ is alive), which aims to help individuals with

1 See '*The morning after: sexual politics at the end of the Cold War*' (1993).

2 Although it is documented that historically women have been part of the military, and recent efforts to include women in all areas of the military since 2000 with the UN Resolution 1325, gender scholars agree that the military is still an institution overwhelmingly dominated by men which keeps appealing to traditional traits masculinities.

3 Apart from recent studies of the militarization of drug policy in Brazil. See Telles, (2019) and Hinz and Vinuto (2022).

drug and alcohol dependency. To minimise participants' emotional distress and to secure the researcher's safety, participants were nominated by their spiritual guides and interviews took place within the premises of *Cristo Vive*. Those who were interested were then provided with information about the research, including a detailed explanation of the project. It was emphasised that participation was voluntary; that they would not be paid nor receive any other material incentive, and that they were free to stop the interview at any given time. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and translated into English by the author. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned.

Interviews were divided into three sections: first addressing participants' childhood and teenage years, the second part addressed their involvement in the drugs trade, then we concluded with their rehabilitation process. The decision to divide the interview in this way responded to a key purpose: to keep apart, as much as possible, participants' narratives on the drugs trade from their religious narratives. I made sure that participants understood I was interested in learning from their life before their conversion to Christianism, and that they would have the time to share their religious experiences at the end of the interview. That said, it is important to highlight that participants' narratives could have been influenced by their later religious conversion.

The researcher's personal characteristics also impact on what is shared in qualitative interviewing and how it is shared (Chiseri-Strater 1996; Pillow 2003). In these encounters, the most significant social characteristic was gender and the fact that I was female allowed participants to share emotions that might have been considered more shameful to share with another man, but also impacted on their willingness to share details about sexual violence for example, on which they were generally more reticent with me than other forms of violence.

The analysis of participants' life story interviews was informed by a discourse theoretic approach. Drawing on poststructuralist conceptions, I understand discourse as a set of regularities and as a form of knowledge. In the former, discourse is a group of related statements and relationships which shape particular discursive practices. Discursive practices are understood 'as the process through which social "reality" comes into being' (Doty 1993: 303). Discourses are determined by time and space in each society (Foucault 1972: 117–182), which means that they are historically contingent, and consequently, changeable (Milliken 1999). What constitutes a dominant discourse today may not be the same tomorrow, so discourses are never complete and always open to change. As a form of knowledge, discourse defines the statements that can be considered as 'real' or 'false'. That is, discourse constitutes what is regarded as real, or unreal, rather than a reflection of 'reality' (Foucault 1972: 224). In this way, discourses provide justification for actions which promote certain ways of thinking, being and acting towards the world (Hall 1985).

Three main discursive themes emerged from analysis of the transcribed interviews: *poverty, gender and violence*. This entailed an iterative analysis within and across the interviews' transcripts. For example, quotes like: 'I was always hungry', 'I had to steal blankets in winter', 'my house was made of tin roof'', 'I lived in the streets' were grouped under the category of poverty. References to gender such as: 'we [men] are unfaithful because we are like animals', 'I obviously wanted to cry but I couldn't in front of them [men in the gang]' and, 'women are vulnerable', were grouped under the category of gender. Similarly, quotes related to violence such as: 'every time our gangs fought there was at least one man seriously hurt', 'at least one stabbed guy', 'or sometimes dead men', or, 'I was very aggressive at school and that is why they expelled me' and, 'I was so violent that sometimes I even punched myself', were grouped under the category of violence. This is a rather sketchy example of this analytical stage, but it explains how poverty, gender and violence emerged from this codification process which, as a poststructuralist researcher, I acknowledge is also the result of my subjective interpretation.

The second analytical stage consisted of examining how discourses of poverty, gender and violence, were constructed in participants' narratives by deploying three textual mechanisms, or analytical tools, suggested by Roxanne Doty (1993) *presuppositions, predication, and subject positioning*. As Doty points out, statements 'rarely speak for themselves' (1993: 306). Each statement carries a background knowledge, or presuppositions, which are understood as 'true'. Hence, the first step was finding the key presuppositions in participants' narratives by interrogating my data in two ways: a) what do they take for granted? And b) what are the 'truths'

implied? Predication involves the examination of the qualities attached to subjects and objects using 'predicates, adverbs and adjectives that modify them' (Doty 1993: 306). This allowed me to pinpoint how different subjects and objects are constructed in participants' narratives. For example, the subject 'gang member' is linked to characteristics such as 'aggressive', 'brave', 'manhood'. Finally, in subject positioning, I looked at how subjects are positioned 'vis-à-vis one another by assigning them different degrees of agency' (Doty 1993: 308), how subjects are related to objects, and how objects are positioned in relation to each other. In employing this analytical strategy, I interrogated my data for what kind of subjects are created, what identities are constituted and how they related to each other.

THE NARCO DISCOURSE

Informed by the understanding of discourse outlined above, I conceptualise the set of regularities I identified in participants' narratives as the *narco discourse*. I see these regularities, and the logic they produce, as indicative of a particular discourse, the 'narco' discourse. My understanding of the *narco discourse* as a set of regularities and as a form of knowledge has significant analytical implications. My analytical approach '…obviates the need for recourse to the interiority of a conscious, meaning-giving subject, either in terms of psychological and cognitive characteristics of individuals or…social collectivities' (Doty 1993: 302). This refers to the poststructuralist conception of the subject as constituted in discourse, as opposed to the humanist approach which conceive it as a 'thinking, knowing, speaking subject' (Foucault 1972: 55). The *narco subject* is the effect of and constituted in discourse. In the case of the *narco discourse*, this entails the understanding that its productive nature (e.g., masculinities) does not necessarily depend on or coincide with participants' motivations or perceptions. Whether participants consciously try to portray gender dynamics in a particular way, or if they try to justify their behaviours, is not relevant to my research. My analysis is rather concerned with examining how the set of regularities (i.e., gender constructions) come into play in the production of meanings and knowledge, and how these enable violent practices linked to their job in the drugs trade.

III. GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE NARCO DISCOURSE

As part of my discursive analysis, I examined the narratives of former narcos looking for ideas perceived as 'truth'. I found three underlying assumptions which informed the construction of gender in the *narco discourse*: 1) men and women are essentially different, 2) only men can hold positions of authority, and 3) men are heterosexual. Masculinities in the *narco discourse* are informed by traditional discourses of gender that still permeate in Mexico and most of the world. Therefore, in terms of gender, the male role model for narcos and other men in the world is very similar. Although the context and resources available to narcos are different from men in the military in Mexico and the US; as I will discuss in the next sections, they share similar understandings of how to perform masculinities, so they are recognised by society as 'real men'.

The *narco discourse* reproduces patriarchal stereotypes of women and gender relations. It holds that it is inconceivable that women behave or think in the same way as men: 'women are naïve and weak, that is why men should protect them. [Because of that] they are used by men in drug trade' (Pato). The phrase 'that is why men should protect them' not only represents women as child-like subjects but also positions men as superior to women by implying the moral duty of men to 'protect' vulnerable and naïve women: 'Men are proud…women are emotional' (Canastas). Following this logic, Pato explained the main difference between men and women as he saw it: '[men] have more possibilities, women are just too weak and naïve.' In this way, the *narco discourse* takes for granted that men are rational, strong, and independent subjects while women are conceived as emotional, vulnerable, and dependent subjects.

Not surprisingly, women's identities are constructed revolving around their roles as wives and mothers. The *narco discourse*, thus reproduces the Mexican stereotype that a woman's main identity is as a mother: 'raising a family is a woman's job. Women are born to have children. Men are not. Men just want to have fun' (Pancho). Accordingly, the *narco discourse* assumes that the private space belongs to women and young children whereas the public sphere belongs to older boys and adult men: 'The women's world is their homes' (Balente). Eduardo

said: 'We (men) are the ones who have to go out and risk our lives.' Rorro summarises this logic: 'This is the way it works: women stay at home, clean the house, take care of the children and do women's stuff.' The public areas, such as 'the streets', are therefore considered as a space reserved for men.

The *narco discourse* also assumes that only men can hold positions of authority, especially in the context of the family. The figure of the father is constructed as the legitimate head of the family, which endorses the family as the 'the site of male power and female submission' (Collier 1998: 149). As Fausto said: 'The head of the family is *obviously* the father. My mother was a good mother, but a boy needs discipline that *only* the father can impose.' Male authority in the *narco discourse* is thus assumed to be natural and legitimate. Even when men do not comply with the traditional role of being the breadwinners, and even if they are absent, the paternal figure is granted moral authority over the family. This implies that women cannot be considered as the head of the family or hold authority over children, even if they are the main carers of the family: 'although my father was an alcoholic, we knew that he was the boss in the house. My mum, bless her, tried to raise us on her own [but] we needed a father figure' (Jaime). What is more telling in this quote is the expression 'bless her', used by Jaime to highlight that his mum's attempts to raise him and his siblings on her own were inevitably in vain because they *needed* a *male* authority figure, which also implies a patronising conception that belittles the mother's work in raising children on her own. This traditional discourse, also explicit in militarised masculinities, reproduce the idea that only men, given their innate physical strength and moral authority, can control other men, and by extension all socio-political institutions.

Finally, the *narco discourse* assumes that men are heterosexual and womanisers by nature. Men's sexual performance is assumed to be one of the most important aspects defining how 'macho' a man is. As Jaime said: 'I was an exceptional lover. I was, as people say in the streets, a good macho…I liked pleasing my women.' Establishing and preserving a good reputation as a good lover is, therefore, of paramount importance. In fact, the use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and some pills, is justified to enhance sexual performance: 'I started to do cocaine because one of my girls told me that it was for having more pleasurable sex, so I did it because a man has a reputation to keep' (Piochas). What is evident is that the underlying purpose of being a good lover is to compete with other men, rather than pleasing their partners: 'I took *tachas* [pills] …that gave me confidence to be with many girls, and that made me feel good because I knew the girls would tell everybody in the neighbourhood' (Canastas). Hence, sexual performance is key to the performance of masculinity which in turn, can be understood as another arena in which men struggle for power with other men. In this way, the *narco discourse* reproduces traditional discourses of gender which suggest 'masculine identity is embodied in the genitals and is articulated with sexuality and power' (Ramirez in Kimmel, Jeff and RW 2005: 119).

IV. NARCO MASCULINITY VIS-À-VIS MILITARISED MASCULINITY

Drawing on the gender constructions discussed above, I found that the hegemonic masculinity in the narco *discourse*, what participants refer as 'a real man' is the hypermasculinity which also informs the militarised masculinity. Table 1 provides a summary of the general characteristics and practices linked to men in the *narco discourse*, and a summary of general traits and behaviours identified by gender scholars linked to the military. These practices and characteristics are not exclusive to these two types of masculinities. What is relevant to my argument is that these are the baseline attributes that *are expected* from men in both cases. In the remainder of this section, I discuss each category: emotions, behaviour, and sexuality, for both masculinities in turn.

EMOTIONS

The cornerstone of narco and military masculinities is the men's ability to control their emotions such as fear, anxiety, and sadness, as well as being immune to the emotions of other people. Some of the participants who had previously been part of the Mexican military, pointed out that a key characteristic shared by narcos and the military is the physical training, and the process of desensitisation that both groups of men must go through. Arévalo explained: 'In the military school they taught us to be more violent, not to have mercy, not to have feelings and to obey

IDEAL MALE CHARACTERISTICS AND PRACTICES REGARDING:	NARCO MASCULINITY[4]	MILITARISED MASCULINITY[5]
EMOTIONS	-Proud -Brave -Rational -Cannot show emotions linked to women, such as being sensitive or crying in public - Desensitised to others' emotions	-Proud -Brave -Rational - Cannot show emotions linked to women, such as being sensitive or crying in public -Desensitised to others' emotions
BEHAVIOUR	-Aggressive -Tough -Engages in fights -Controls women and weaker men	-Aggressive -Tough -Engages in fights -Controls women and weaker men -Self-disciplined
SEXUALITY	-Heterosexual (Homosexuality is seen as a deviation and a weakness) -Sexual assault/harassment is normalised -Objectification of partners -Need to affirm masculinity -Male promiscuity is a right	-Heterosexual (Homosexuality is seen as a deviation and a weakness) -Sexual assault/harassment is tolerated -Objectification of partners -Desire to affirm masculinity -Male promiscuity is a need

Table 1 Ideal characteristics and practices linked to narco masculinity and militarised masculinity.

orders.' Tabo adds: 'They [military] teach you how to be a tough guy, not to have feelings and to be ready to die at any moment.' Similarly, another participant, a former recruiter for a drug trade organisation explained that they taught the boys and young men to be ready for an early death: 'when you get in this business you know the deal, you can die at any moment' (Canastas). Other participants suggested that, as part of their job in drug trade, they had to go through a 'sort of military training.' Memo, for example, stated:

> I was trained for three years in the jungle in how to charge [arms], how to use them in a moving vehicle, how to position ourselves and how to shoot. They [instructors] ...also taught us how to kill and how to torture...one of the first lessons is to kill somebody you know so you learn to be tough and to do a clean job, no emotions.

Participants who had both experiences, working for DTOs and being part of the Mexican army, mention that the military training was more difficult than the one they had in the criminal organisation. Quiroz narrated how the military changed his personality and the impact it had on his personal life: 'The military took away my smile. They did not let us be polite or sensitive. I learned to hate civilians, they taught us how to be tough, without feelings [...] Being so tough and insensitive affected my marriage.' This is what Paul Higate denominates combat masculinity which is a dominant masculinity within the military culture defined as 'a model of admired masculine conduct while it may be far from the real experiences of enlisted men, [...] it carries masculine ideals, fantasies, and desires and has historic roots' (in Kronsell 2016: 321). The combat masculinity developed within the military is no different from the narco masculinity. In both cases men are expected to achieve an ideal of masculinity that is far from real experiences. However, despite the emotional and physical costs involved, men still engage in violent practices to 'create hierarchies that subordinate others while simultaneously placing their own perceived characteristics in positions of symbolic dominance' (Hinojosa 2010: 179). An empirical study in Brazil identified a similar hypermasculinity, referred as 'warrior ethos' among drug traffickers and the police forces (Hinz and Vinuto 2022: 2). Both groups of men, police/military and drug traffickers are encouraged to perform their masculinity by expressing their emotions through aggressive attitudes. Crucially, in both cases, alternative non-violent ways to solve conflicts are not considered.

That said, an important nuance in the *narco discourse* is the understanding that men can show emotions associated to women, such as crying, in private spaces: 'When I was drunk, I cried

4 Drawing on the authors' discourse analysis of participants' life stories.

5 Drawing on studies on military masculinities: Van Gilder 2019 (Qualitative interviews in USA); McAllister et al. 2019 (Qualitative interviews in UK); Schaefer et al. 2021 (Quantitative study in USA). The characteristics included in the table are the author's summary of the qualities discussed in these studies.

because I felt lonely; I felt very sad and bitter. I would go to my grandmother's house, and I would kneel and hug her. I told her, I am not a bad guy, granny' (Dionisio). Palomo explained: 'we all knew we were dying inside, but you have to pretend that nothing can hurt you…Nobody would respect you if you were a wimp…so I cried on my own. At home when nobody would see me.' In this way the *narco discourse* distinguishes between the social constructed male characteristics that boys and young men adopt to be regarded as 'real men', and those characteristics that can only be displayed at home such as being sad or affectionate.

BEHAVIOUR

While in other types of masculinities violent behaviour and aggressive attitudes might be conceived as a prerogative of men in limited circumstances, such as self-defence in a pub fight, the narco masculinity enhances them as essential male behaviours to be adopted on a regular basis. Similarly, the militarised masculinity places aggressive and controlling behaviours at the centre of the male identity and essential to do their regular jobs. Furthermore, both types of masculinities are constructed in opposition to all characteristics and behaviours that are considered as feminine. As discussed above, military training is the regime through which aggressive and violent behaviours are encouraged emphasising '… fear of weakness and signs of femininity, willingness to inflict wounds and death, and contempt for outsiders' (Connell 2016a: 6). Quiroz explained that in his experience:

> The military is the worst of all. We knew we had immunity. We tortured people to confess to crimes they did not commit; we took advantage of vulnerable girls and women …We took advantage of the confusion and mess created by narcos. We felt like real men, like unbeatable. I knew it was wrong though. I felt bad, but if I said something the other soldiers would accuse me of not following orders with my superiors, so I had to follow the leader.

Peer pressure, acquiescence to superiors, and what is seen as respect for the institution, play a key role in reproducing combat masculinities in the military. Likewise, these same factors are fundamental to DTOs. Violence and aggressive behaviours are linked to the capacity of men to inspire 'fear' and 'respect'. As Facundo said, when he was a child, he admired a narco because '…he was fearless and because everybody respected him, even the police.' Likewise, Cristian explained: 'When I was a kid, I wanted to be a soldier or a boxer. I wanted to be someone with authority.' Once again, authority and physical strength are linked to the ideal manhood: 'I wanted to be a soldier, because people respect them…I thought soldiers were like Rambo, that they were indestructible' (Difos). These quotes illustrate the significance of 'fear' and 'respect' in the construction of masculinity in the *narco discourse* which are not only related to survival but also held up as aspirational ideals. Also, it is noteworthy to highlight how hegemonic militarised masculinities are embedded in these quotes which link the same qualities to different, even antagonistic groups of men: narcos, boxers and soldiers.

SEXUALITY

Heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is the 'natural' or 'normal' sexual orientation, is profoundly ingrained in the narco and the military masculinity. Notwithstanding recent efforts to challenge traditional gender roles within the military organisational context (Gedro 2013), 'given the idealized notion of military masculinity and heterosexuality, alternative genders and sexualities remain marginalised' (Van Gilder 2019: 151). Heteronormativity is justified 'on the grounds of preserving combat effectiveness' (Duvin in Van Gilder 2019: 151). Essentially, 'effectiveness' is linked to violence and hypermasculinity which subordinates other genders considered as inferior (Schaefer et al. 2021). In this way, the military ethos preserves the gender order by reproducing essentialist and rigid dichotomies:

> Men take life and women give life. Men protect and women are protected. Men are strong and courageous, and women are weak and emotional. Men are responsible to the state and women to their family. Men are motivated to function in the horror of war by the thought of returning to the normalcy of home as symbolized by mother, wife, sweetheart, and the nurses who care for them in battle (McSally 2011: 149).

The narco masculinity draws on the same dichotomies. As discussed earlier, in the *narco discourse* heterosexuality is taken for granted, and men's sexuality is portrayed as free and

lascivious. In contrast to 'naïve' and 'emotional' women, men are like animals who are driven by their instincts, as Jaime said: 'Men are like dogs. We only care about sex. That is the reality.' This 'reality' is produced and sustained by the gender order largely established by militarised masculinities. As a result, as Collier points out, men all over the world have benefited from this essentialised view: '[men] are innately brutish driven by sexual imperatives' (1998: 129). Informed by this logic, the *narco discourse* produces a male subject who is incapable of resisting his sexual drive and thereby justifies promiscuous behaviour by naturalising men's 'need' to have sex with several women: 'I did love my wife…She was a good woman. But…I still had other girls in my life. But those were only for sex.' (Difos). Similarly, Paco said: 'I was obviously unfaithful because I had to travel a lot … and a man has needs.'

Any deviation from heterosexual relationships is articulated as abnormal in the *narco discourse*. Homosexuality is conceived to be shameful and as an insult to a man's reputation. As Memo said:

> Since childhood we would consider homosexuals to be the worst of all. Nobody wanted to be associated with them. That is why we strived so hard to let people know that we were not faggots by being promiscuous and aggressive. You know, all those things that define a man.

In the context of the military there is a similar logic (Schaefer et al. 2021), as Van Gilder (2019: 158) explains, feminine traits, and feminine others, are considered as a 'threat to military effectiveness [which is] born out of a fear that masculine environment could become feminized.' Likewise, the narco masculinity rejects female behaviours and attitudes. For example, Pato said: 'I was brought up with the idea that a real man who is a man is not a faggot: a man does not hug or kiss another man.' More significantly, the *narco discourse* assumes that if men do not engage in violent or aggressive behaviours they would be regarded as homosexuals: 'I did not like fighting against other gangs, but I had to do it, otherwise they call you chicken or faggot' (Pequeño).

V. WHO IS THE 'REAL MAN' IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS?

A dominant trope in the *narco discourse* is the idea of 'a real man' [*un hombre de verdad*] referring to a man who embodies the militarised masculinities discussed above. What is revealing is that, apart from gender and critical studies,[6] scholarship on the drugs trade typically reproduce simplified binary narratives that refer to the military as the 'good' and narcos as the 'bad'. In doing so, these narratives overlook the fact that 'narco violence' is the reflection of the 'state violence' crystalised in the militarisation of the 'drug problem'. The double moral standard in mainstream narratives on the global war on drugs (militarised masculinities are praised when they are performed on behalf of the state but condemned when they are replicated by others), only makes sense if we appropriate the logic of the war on drugs promoted by the US: 'us' versus 'them', 'good' versus 'evil', 'enemies' and 'friends', 'protector' and 'protected' (Buzan, Wver, & Wilde 1998; Cabañas 2012).

While there is no question about the harmful and appalling violence produced by DTOs, what remains unchallenged is the callousness implied in the very core of the militaristic strategy chosen to combat drugs to the detriment of other non-violent options such as treating the so called 'drug problem' as a health issue (Muehlmann 2018). In this sense, the 'real men', hypermasculine and violent, protagonists in the global war on drugs are not the 'savage' sicarios who are cannon fodder in a transnational drug trade (Biron 2015), but those who choose a military strategy to tackle it. Only elite groups, such as politicians and businessmen, have the means and the power to influence cultural norms, or exemplar standards of how to be a man, i.e., hegemonic masculinities. Considering that the drug trade is a lucrative business in which there are an array of 'white-collar'/elite roles including accountants, judges, politicians, banks, businessmen, and even governments who benefit from money laundering (Young and Woodiwiss 2020), we have to add to our analysis the transnational business masculinity, which is considered by Connell and Wood (2005: 347) as the hegemonic masculinity of the 21st

6 See: Enloe 1993; Boyd 2002; Frías-Martínez 2008; Ferragut 2011; Mercille 2011;Valencia Triana 2012; Cruz-Tome and Ortega-Olivares 2007; Jiménez-Guzmán 2007; Carlos 2014; Kronsell 2016; Córdova and Hernández 2016; Nuñez-González 2017; Muehlmann 2018; Soltero and Loza 2021.

century. This type of masculinity, embodied by men at the pinnacle of financial and political institutions, is characterised by 'increasing egocentrism, very conditional loyalties (even to the corporation), and a declining sense of responsibility for others (except for purposes of image making)' (Connell 1998: 16). Violent practices facilitated by transnational business masculinity are less self-evident, but no less harmful than those directly involved in the militarised or the narco masculinity. As Biron (2015: 187) points out, the cruelty implicit in this masculinity is often ignored because

> [i]n contrast to narco-masculinity's relatively local savagery and high drama..." transnational business masculinity "often inflict[s] horrific violence from a distance and on increasingly large scales...the elegantly suited masculinity of neoliberalism calmly disregards world-wide costs of business such as low wage and slave labour, deforestation, oil wars, resource-depletion, and air pollution

The US and Mexico have justified the escalation of violence using a war rethoric through the construction of categorical truth: the war is necessary. Violence is 'necessary' and is the 'only' way to tackle the violence of DTOs (Telles 2019). This regime of truth, in turn, has justified mass killings and other crimes labeled as 'collateral damage' such as human rights violations, torture, and femicides. 'We', civil society, have been convinced that the use of physical force and confrontation is the best way to cope with the 'drug problem', and to win the self imposed war against 'them' (narcos). Militarised masculinities have been crucial in sustaining this 'truth', and perpetuating the perception of the global war on drugs as the obvious way to confront the 'drug problem'.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that constructions of gender play a key role in perpetuating the global war on drugs. My research with former drug traffickers shows how their constructions of masculinity mirrors militarised masculinities, which, I have shown, is the hegemonic masculinity in the global war on drugs. The 'real men' (i.e., the most violent and powerful) behind drug trade violence are not drug traffickers from Mexico, or other producer countries in the so-called Global South. Instead, this article has suggested that the real men of the global war on drugs are those who chose a militaristic strategy to combat the 'threat of drugs', ignoring other policy alternatives, such as treating drug misuse as a health issue. Militarised masculinities implicit in the US sponsored war on drugs legitimise the exercise of violence to resolve conflicts. Not surprisingly, men on both sides of the war behave in similar ways because they aim to construct and claim the same masculinity. Therefore, in terms of gender, there is no 'us' and 'them' in the global war on drugs and only 'sides' chosen (which of itself can be flexible). As Tabo, one of the participants of my research, suggested, 'violence is violence' the only difference is that 'we [narcos] did not have a uniform.'

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Informed oral and written consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the detailed comments provided by the anonymous reviewers and the editors. Special thanks to Dr. Natasha Carver for her comprehensive feedback on the final drafts of this paper.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Fieldwork for this research was supported by the Mexican Council of Science and Technology (CONACY) and the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
García-Reyes, K. 2022. The 'Real Man' in the Global War on Drugs: Narco versus Militarised Masculinities. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 4(2), pp. 191–203. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.121

Submitted: 18 August 2021
Accepted: 12 May 2022
Published: 02 December 2022

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Journal of Illicit Economies and Development is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.

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